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Manifestos as an extended marketing campaign (Andrew White, University of Nottingham Ningbo, China)

Introduction

Manifestos are one of the main means by which parties project their 'brand', chiefly by presenting policy prescriptions which collectively position them at clearly identifiable points along the political spectrum (Cwalina 2011: 25-26). This essay focuses mainly on the manifestos of the two governing parties in the run up to the 2015 UK General Election, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, as well as the main opposition party, Labour. It will also include the manifestos of the other leading 'national parties', the Green Party and UKIP. The essay does not discuss the manifestos of the parties whose electoral activities are confined to only one of the constituent nations of the UK, but, because of its prominence in the national (UK) campaign and the fact that it is the third largest party at Westminster, an exception has been made for the Scottish National Party (SNP). The following analysis focuses on the manifesto as a platform to project each party's brand, as well as how that brand is communicated to the electorate through mini-campaigns and media events. Space does not allow a consideration of all policies, so, given that it was a key concern of the public, was central to the campaign and featured prominently in the main parties' manifestos, economic policy is the main focus of this analysis.

The manifesto as brand projection

In addition to enabling the party to establish itself at a specific point on the political spectrum, the manifesto also gives parties the opportunity to project their reputation and trustworthiness. This 'valence' approach to politics, whereby parties seek to convince the electorate of their competence in broad areas that voters' deem to be important, has become particularly significant in modern British politics as differences on individual policies have narrowed so much that there is little differentiation in the positions of the main parties.. An example of a valence issue is 'a strong economy' and, given its prominence in the 2015 election, this paper focuses on just that issue (Whiteley *et al.* 2005: 148).

Many academic discussions on political marketing in the UK use Lees-Marshment tripartite schema of the market-oriented party (MOP), the sales-oriented party (SOP) and the product-oriented party (POP) (Lees-Marshment 2008: 20, 30, 33). She argues that in contemporary democracies parties are primarily market-oriented, as evidenced by the continual use of market intelligence such as through focus groups and private polling. In this sense, like commercial marketing, parties are selling a *product* which they *adjust* in light of the feedback that they receive from the *buyers*, in this case the electorate (Lees-Marshment 2008: 21-23) Lees-Marshment implies that the product is essentially each party's manifesto and this is the understanding of others who have also used her MOP model (Lilleker and Negrine 2006: 38).

However, a major drawback of using this theoretical framework for this particular paper would be that it is difficult to measure empirically how the parties' responded to – or *adjusted* their product – following feedback from the electorate. In the time and space available, it is not feasible to survey this interaction between the parties and the electorate. Instead, drawing on the work of Cwalina, Falkowski and Newman (2011), the paper examines the 2015 manifestos within the context of brand identity and valence. Here, the paper employs the two foundational layers of the four layer pyramid brand equity model,

which is a modification of Keller's (2001) non-political construct. The base layer is 'brand salience' and refers to the identity of parties, especially where they position themselves on the left-right spectrum. While the manifesto is an important facet of this positioning, it is important to note that this is established through the programme and associated pronouncements in their totality rather than through individual policies (Cwalina 2011: 25-26). The next layer comprises 'brand performance' and 'brand imagery', where meaning is established when "consumers believe the brand has attributes and benefits that satisfy their needs and wants such that a positive overall brand attitude is formed" (Cwalina 2011: 26). If the first layer can be associated with brand identity, the second encapsulates the valence approach to political marketing that was explicated above, both of which approaches provide the theoretical framework for the study of the 2015 manifestos. The following analysis therefore is concentrated on the way in which parties' project their own brand, as well as how they respond to the electorates' most important valence issue, the parties' respective capacity to run a strong economy.

The manifestos' role in promoting economic competence as brand identity

The manifesto of the leading party in the 2010-2015 Coalition and subsequent outright winner of the 2015 election, the Conservative Party, was dominated by economic policies, with issues other than the economy, taxation or job creation barely featuring until page 27 of the 81 page document (Conservative Party 2015). The emphasis on its economic plan was the chief means in which it attempted to both defend its own record in government and differentiate it from the previous Labour government's economic performance. This tone was established in the first sentence of David Cameron's foreword, where he quoted the ill-conceived words of the departing New Labour Treasury Minister Liam Byrne in 2010: "there is no [government] money" (Conservative Party 2015: 5). The Conservatives' attempted to

convince the reader of their trustworthiness by highlighting their setting up of the Office for Budgetary Responsibility (OBR), arguing that it gives independent verification of the soundness of their economic plan (Conservative Party 2015: 7). Interspersed with the plain black text of the manifesto were large blue and bolded italicised sentences as well as blue panels with a large single white text sentence in each, both of which occurred around once a page. On one occasion, the same phrase - "To eliminate the deficit we must continue to cut out wasteful spending" - appeared largely out of context on separate pages near the beginning and end of the manifesto, thus bookending the main message of the campaign (Conservative Party 2015: 9, 47).

While the manifesto is an unashamed defence of traditional conservative policies, the emphasis on low taxation and help for new and existing home-owners was directed, as the Conservatives' made explicit in their accompanying publicity, to ordinary "working people" (Conservative Party 2015a). This message was reinforced by the bold panelled message that: "The richest are paying a greater share of income tax than in any of Labour's 13 years" (Conservative Party 2015: 9). The manifesto does not mention that, to the extent to which this is accurate, it was largely a result of the insistence of their coalition partner that the threshold at which tax was levied should be significantly raised (Ashcroft 2013). But it provided a convenient means of countering the oft-repeated criticism that the Conservative Party was, as it always had been, a party mainly for the rich. It weaved this message into policies, like health and education, where its austerity programme made it vulnerable, by asserting that these vital sectors of society could only be adequately supported if the economy was strong.

As perhaps expected from a party that had been in opposition for five years prior to the election and whose economic record in the latter years of its previous administration made it vulnerable, the Labour Party began its manifesto with an economic pledge in the

form of the “Budget Responsibility Lock” (Labour Party 2015: 1). This Lock was much more prescriptive than would be expected of a manifesto, its main features being:

- A promise that every single manifesto item would be paid for without additional borrowing
- To bring forward legislation to ensure that in the future manifesto commitments from all parties would be audited by the OBR
- The first line of the first Labour government budget would be “This budget cuts the deficit every year”. Subsequent budgets would be required to cut the deficit and this process would be audited by the OBR

(Labour Party 2015: 1)

This message was reinforced by the argument that the Coalition government had reneged on its promises on reducing the deficit: “The Conservative-led Government promised to balance the books in this Parliament. But this promise has been broken. The Conservatives will leave the country borrowing over £75 billion this year” (Labour Party 2015: 17).

The Labour Party’s manifesto emphasised traditional concerns relating to ‘fairness’ in taxation and measures to combat inequality. Surprisingly, though, discussion on the economy was lengthier than that on health and education combined, two issues Labour has traditionally focused on and where a sizeable number of the electorate believed that these services had declined under the Coalition government (The British Election Study Team 2015). This seeming lack of consistent messaging reflected a problem which at that time still bedevilled the Labour Party: to what extent was the New Labour brand still a part of its identity? Ed Miliband’s seeming rejection of the term as long ago as 2010 suggests that by 2015 it had very little relevance to the way in which the party presented itself. However, former

government communications director Alastair Campbell lamented that his pleas to the party at the beginning of the Miliband's leadership to challenge the Conservative Party's narrative about the debt were ignored, thus hampering Labour's stance on the issue: "When Miliband was elected leader, he felt uncomfortable defending the Blair-Brown record. He wanted to disassociate himself from the past and talk about the future" (quoted in Wintour 2015). Therefore, the view of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats on the national debt gained traction with the electorate early in the previous parliament, assuming a valence that the Labour Party could not ignore in its manifesto. But, as Campbell intimated above, this was just the sort of issue that exposed the division in the party's view of itself, between those who wanted to brand it as a social democratic movement primarily concerned with addressing inequality and a more centrist, dare I say New-Labour-type-, party focused on fiscal rectitude. This resulted in the manifesto appearing to be at odds with some of Ed Miliband's public pronouncements, so making it difficult for the party to project a clear message on the deficit (Wintour 2015).

The manifesto of the Conservatives' junior coalition partner from 2010 to 2015, the Liberal Democrats, also devoted a considerable amount of content to the economy. However, the treatment of it was divided into two sections, "responsible finances" and "prosperity for all", with the latter being more than twice as long (Liberal Democrats 2015). While the policy on deficit reduction outlined in the first section was broadly similar to the Conservatives', the Liberal Democrats were keen to put distance between themselves and their erstwhile Coalition partner in emphasising, most prominently in a bold all-page graphic, that they would cut less from services and raise taxes where necessary (Liberal Democrats 2015: 19, 20). This illustrates the delicate balancing act that the Liberal Democrats had to carry out in both defending their record in government, as the manifesto of a governing party should do, *and* making clear how they are distinct from their Coalition partner. This is difficult as it

implied that the Liberal Democrats were opposed to some Coalition policies, not unsurprising given that it was the junior partner. Thus it is noticeable that the first section on responsible finances was not only short (five pages including a one page graphic) but also did not employ the striking tabular "a record of delivery" boxes highlighting the translation of 2010 manifesto commitments into government policy that other sections did (Liberal Democrats 2015). This suggests that the Liberal Democrats' differed from the Conservatives in their approach to cutting the deficit during the Coalition period itself, even if for obvious reasons this could not be expressed in its manifesto.

But this also reflected divisions within the Liberal Democrats between fiscal hawks and those who were more concerned about the consequences of starving public services of much needed investment. This division was at the heart of long-held differences over the party's identity between those who wanted to use the state to advance a liberal social and economic agenda, which would include interventions in the market to reduce inequality, and those libertarians who wanted to reduce the power of the state, especially in the economic sphere (Dale 2013; Perraudin 2015). The divisions might explain why, despite distancing the party from the Conservatives on investment on the public services, its policy on reducing the deficit was not substantially different from them. This internal tension was occasionally expressed in statements in the manifesto which made a virtue of fiscal rectitude at the expense of more socially progressive policies: "For too long, sickness benefits were used as a way of parking people away from the unemployment statistics" (Liberal Democrats 2015: 48).

The Scottish National Party (SNP)'s manifesto was characterised by its demand that the policies of austerity should end, and proposed that an extra £140 million should be set aside to fund public services including the NHS (SNP 2015: 5). There was a commitment to

tackle the deficit "as part of a medium term strategy to ensure prudent levels of debt are achieved" (SNP 2015: 4) but very little detail on precisely how this would be done and in what timescale. One advantage that the SNP had was that it was not competing with the Conservatives for seats and hence was not concerned with being viewed as insufficiently tough on the deficit. In that sense, Labour's need to market its policies to English voters in Conservative/Labour marginal seats meant that it could not afford not to attempt to offer a credible plan to cut the deficit, a policy that could be interpreted in Scotland (especially by the SNP) as an extension of austerity.

As parties that were never likely to play a significant role in the post-election government, it could be argued that UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) and the Green Party were under little pressure to compromise their principles and hence would have a freer rein than the other parties to construct an internally coherent and convincing brand. And this was borne out by the very short sections on the economy, with UKIP's plan to reduce the deficit being merely a pledge that its MPs would pressurise the government into adhering to the current Treasury plan (UKIP 2015: 8); the Greens, as would be expected, proposed a more environmentally sustainable economy (Green Party 2015). UKIP's reference to the problems of "political correctness" and multiculturalism appear to bolster its self-styled identity as a party that, unlike the mainstream parties, is prepared to speak its mind even when that makes some people uncomfortable. However, this did not mean that both parties were not concerned with their public image, and this can be seen in relation to their portrayal of their leaders. Party leader Nigel Farage only featured once in the UKIP manifesto after the foreword, with each of its 28 sections introduced by the relevant party spokesperson (though in true 'politically incorrect' style UKIP refers to each, including when female, as a "spokesman"!) (UKIP 2015). Similarly, the foreword that party leader Natalie Bennett gave at the beginning of the Green Party manifesto masked her distinct lack of profile in the main

body of the document. In the case of Farage, concerns that UKIP was viewed by the public as a 'one-man band' led the party to appoint a number of spokespersons in June 2014 to promote its policies and the manifesto reflects this push to give prominence to a wider range of politicians than have been associated with the party in the past (Morris 2014). Bennett's lack of profile in the Green Party manifesto followed a series of poor media interviews. There was even a request to broadcasters from the Green Party that its only MP Caroline Lucas replace Bennett in some of the TV debates (Boffey 2015). This request was turned down but it is not surprising that Lucas was so prominent in the manifesto. Indeed, the frequent references to her work as an MP not only was an attempt to deflect attention from Bennett's media appearances but also served to highlight the Green Party's record when in actual power, albeit in the form of one seat in the House of Commons.

To give their economic policies more credibility, both parties laid out very detailed and fully costed financial plans for the next parliament, with UKIP's being subject to an independent audit by CEBR (Centre for Economics and Business Research). Superficially, it seems odd that parties that had little chance of being in a government after the election would expend so much time providing this amount of detail. There is a historical precedent for this in the detail that the Liberals and then the Liberal Democrats put into its manifestos during the twentieth century, even when the parties were at their lowest ebb. That was because, in the absence of real power, activists were motivated mainly by the chance to develop very detailed policies (Brack 2000: 16). It could also be argued that this also gives the impression that these are parties are to be taken seriously, an indication that, despite their self-proclaimed 'outsider' status, the UKIP and Green party brands to a certain extent are intended to project 'responsibility'. This was especially important in relation to economic policy, an issue which gained more media coverage than all other policy issues in this election (Loughborough University 2015 and 2015a). That one of Natalie Bennett's most disastrous media interviews

involved her inability to adequately explain the cost of her party's housing policy, demonstrated the Green party's need to be able to articulate their economic policies even when they are not the centrepiece of the manifesto; this could be said to be true of UKIP too. However, this scrutiny of their economic policies was likely to have mainly benefited the party for whom this policy was the most associated, namely the Conservatives.

The 2015 Manifestos as mini-campaigns and media events

Because they also have a programmatic function, in that they offer a programme of government as well as selling a party's brand, a key characteristic of UK manifestos has been their growth over time. There has been a four-fold increase in the length of all parties' manifestos from 1945-59 to 1983-97 (Kavanagh 2000: 5) and the the size of the 2015 offerings are likely to have deterred all but the most devoted of political aficionados. Nonetheless, while it could be argued from survey evidence taken during the 2015 election that the electorate is not as well informed about each party's manifesto as would be expected, a majority of voters recognised the NHS and the economy as being priorities for the Labour Party and the Conservatives respectively (British Election Study 2015). This suggests that some of the major manifesto commitments of the parties were resonating with a sizeable section of the public. Given the findings of a Loughborough University (2015 and 2015a) study that more than 40% of mainstream media coverage of the 2015 election was devoted to the so-called 'horse-race', then how did parties' get their message across?

From around the 2001 general election, parties started to reduce the number of, what hitherto had been daily, press conferences, as it was felt that these benefited journalists more than they did the parties (Gaber 2011: 265). This trend continued into subsequent elections, with the Liberal Democrats being the only leading party to hold

one on most days in the 2010 campaign; indeed there was no one day in that campaign where all three of the main parties held a press conference (Gaber 2011: 265). These press conferences were replaced by a smaller number of what might be described as mini-campaigns. The Conservatives were much more advanced in moving towards this model of campaigning in the 2010 election, focusing mainly on 'manifesto' or 'contract' launches fronted by David Cameron rather than press conferences, of which there were only three (Gaber 2011: 265).

A timeline of the 2015 election shows that it was the Labour Party that appeared to host more of these mini-campaigns. As far back as December 2014, a draft version of its manifesto, *Changing Britain Together*, was launched for public consultation (Labour List 2014). While there seems little difference in policy terms between the two iterations of the manifesto (Labour Party 2014 and 2015), this could be considered an effective way of fixing in the public mind its key messages, especially on the deficit, before the official campaign even started. In addition to the launch of its election manifesto on 13 April, the Labour Party unveiled an additional five specialist manifestos as well as, in the last week of the campaign, an election pledge stone (Moore 2015, see Chapter 7 for more detail). The other parties had fewer mini-manifesto launches, but orchestrated or exploited a series of media events at crucial points during the campaign. Thus the Conservatives benefited from a letter from one hundred prominent business figures claiming that a Labour government would be bad for the economy which appeared two days after the latter launched its business manifesto (Moore 2015: 11-12). As only governing parties can do, the Conservatives and, to a lesser extent, the Liberal Democrats were helped by the surely not coincidental timing of "pension freedom day" on 6 April, which completely opened up

pensioners' retirement funds in order to allow them to spend or invest the money in any way they wished (Charles 2015).

Away from these formal launches, there was also a lot of marketing activity taking place online, with the Liberal Democrats and Greens in particular producing many different mini-manifestos to appeal to various demographics. This trend was evident as far back as the 2005 election, when Labour and the Liberal Democrats both produced separate women's manifestos and this can be an effective means of, in marketing terms, appealing to different segments of the electorate. The development of and widespread access to broadband in the past 10-15 years has provided a cheap public platform for the hosting of these ancillary materials and the Greens and Liberal Democrats in particular exploited that. But the use of new media technologies can have mixed success, as illustrated by a video that the Liberal Democrats (2015a) produced to criticise the Labour's Party's launch of a separate manifesto for women. Opening with a woman washing-up, this attempt at satire largely failed, especially when it is considered that the Liberal Democrats produced many such discrete manifestos in the election as well as a women's manifesto in 2005.

Despite all these additional activities, the continuing importance of the launches of the main manifestos was illustrated by the Conservative Party's decision only days before it was due to take place to change the date of its launch to avoid a clash with the Labour Party's so that, in its view, each would be subjected to a full day's scrutiny (presumably from the mainly Conservative-supporting press) (ITV 2015).

The election result

Notwithstanding the obvious danger in making an explicit link between the parties' respective marketing of their manifestos and their performance in the election, I will

nonetheless finish with a few observations about the role of political marketing in the 2015 campaign.

The Conservatives concentration on the economy and the deficit was viewed as making for an uninspiring (Kellner 2015) and, up until the exit poll at 10pm on election night, unsuccessful campaign. But it was an effective campaign, in which the Conservative message was consistent and relentless – 55% of its candidates' tweets were about the economy (Morris 2015: 57) – and the party was helped by a press which was almost overwhelmingly anti-Labour and a mainstream media which devoted one-third of policy discussion on its news programmes to the economy (Morris 2015: 20, 28, 57). The manifestos were part of the process of keeping the economy in the news, as one survey showed mainstream media interest in this policy peaking around the time of their launches (Morris 2015: 46).

The Conservatives' brand focused, as it has in previous election, on its self-proclaimed economic competence. It defined the debate on the deficit early in the 2010-2015 parliament and, as such, all parties to a greater or lesser degree had to discuss this issue on the Conservatives' terrain. This, in turn, established economic competence as the most important issue in the election. The Conservatives were thus able to more convincingly portray its policies as closer to the concerns of the electorate than the other parties. But, my caveat above about being reluctant to link branding and valence explicitly to the election result is reinforced by the observation that the Conservatives' share of the overall vote was only 36.9% (Shephard 2015: 29).

Indeed, there is the intriguing question of whether many people voted for the Conservatives not out of great enthusiasm but in order to prevent a government in which the SNP would hold the balance of power. The fact that 25% of all voters and 38% of those who voted Conservative did not think that the election result gave the party a mandate to eliminate the deficit (The British Election Study Team 2015) suggests that many people went to bed on

the night of 7 May with the expectation that the manifesto policies that they voted for would be diluted in coalition negotiations. Claims that there was a significant surge in the membership of the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party in the week following the election (Beck 2015) might indicate that, while the Conservative manifesto was successful as a marketing product, the programmatic function of putting its mandated policies into legislation is proving to be less popular with a significant section of the public.

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